DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 028 CS 200 577

AUTHOR Richardson, Betty
TITLE The Happy Hooker in the Classroom: Female Rights and Professional Responsibilities.
PUB DATE Oct 72
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Assn. (14th, St. Louis, October 26-28, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Community Programs; *Equal Opportunities (Jobs); Females; *Feminism; *Self Actualization; Sex Discrimination; *Stereotypes; Working Women

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of whether professional women present the best models for the young to follow, suggesting that perhaps women do much to substantiate the very myths that destroy them. Images that are used by women to amuse, bewilder, or infuriate their male counterparts (and that perpetuate sexist stereotypes) include (1) the stolid intellectual who tends to be abrasive, exploitative, and sometimes blatantly self-seeking; (2) the woman who strives for equality through sexual dress (3) the whiner who meets every argument or difficulty with a temper tantrum or flow of tears; (4) the women whose primary commitment is to home and family; and (5) the submissive female who strives to recognition by serving others. New feminist programs need to emerge that can include the whole community in guiding women toward self-education and self-development. Feminist programs must demand toughness of intellect, dedication of purpose, and integrity of knowledge so that feminism can be distinguished not by its flash or kitsch, but by its adaptability to the highest traditions of wisdom and learning. (HOD)

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

14

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Betty Richardson
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Betty Richardson
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 077028

The Happy Hooker in the Classroom: Female Rights and Professional Responsibilities

In a recent survey of 418 modern language departments, the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession produced relatively predictable data. Women make up 49% of instructors or lecturers, but only 7% of full professors. Of new appointments for the 1971-72 academic year, 45% of those at the ranks of instructor and lecturer were granted to women, but only 13% of new full professors were female. The study, reports the Commission, engenders a "guarded optimism."[1] Such optimism seems unduly optimistic. For the past several decades, academe, of all the professions, has provided the most hospitable haven for bright females. Yet even here there obviously remains a high level of resistance to the hiring and encouragement of professional women.

Is this resistance in part justified? Is there some reason why professional women are viewed, at best, with alarm and, at worst, with fear and loathing by intransigent male colleagues and administrators? Do many women, even professional women, continue to fault their own careers and to undermine the progress of younger sisters? In a recent New York Times essay, Joan Didion illumined some partial answers to these questions. The original idea underlying the women's movement, she pointed out, was Marxist. This is hardly a noteworthy insight, and it is obvious, also, that Marxism is intrinsically repellant to the majority of middle-class males and actually horrifying to the American housewives who of recent years have indulged themselves with consciousness-raising sessions and open marriages. So Marxism has given way. And, as Ms. Didion quite significantly observed, it has been supplanted merely by the hedonism and self-indulgence of those who have lost touch with ideas. Many of today's converts, she noted, are those "who want not a revolution but 'romance,' who believe not in the oppression of women but in their own chances for a new life in exactly the mold of their old life."[2] As do most such generalizations, this savors of the superficial. Yet it illumines the reasons for a current feminist problem in academe, where, time after time, grievance procedures point to seriously confused role-playing among so-called professional women.

This matter has serious implications for feminist studies. The most obvious question is whether we, as professional women, present the best models for the young to follow. Can feminist curricula be developed for undergraduates until feminists have educated themselves? Do we now have anything solid to offer to young girls or housewives or secretaries? That radical feminists have anything to offer now seems doubtful. Divorced from the mainstream of American life, the remaining revolutionaries seem swamped in empty rhetoric, talking only to each other and to the slim minority of young women already oriented toward radical goals. Their theoretical talk of a brave new world hardly fills the extremely practical and immediate needs of the half-educated woman who holds a job and maintains a family, here and now, in our society, as it now exists. And newer feminists seem preoccupied with trivia. Or with matters of style-setting, quite like the style-setting of Vogue or Mademoiselle, only in reverse: if underpants were de rigueur in the past, they will be passé in the future; if body hair was

Copyright © 1972 by Betty Richardson

CS 200 577

tabu in the past, it will be le plus a la mode in days to come. Such matters seem as detached from the actual problems of working women as the social needs of Jacqueline Onassis are from those of a welfare mother. If this continues, women of the middle and poorer classes will increasingly shrug off the rhetoric of feminism as irrelevant, as it essentially will be. Thus, living in isolation from the mainstream of common life, feminists, even while complaining of their isolation, will ensure its self-perpetuation; moreover, they will train the young, not to find and hold jobs, but merely to echo the bitter complaints of their elders.

To prove my point--that we are incompetent at the task we are setting ourselves--I would like to examine, hard-headedly, the image of the academic woman, as she is seen by male colleagues and administrators. It is an unpleasant vision. Nonetheless, it must be faced realistically, for, as one works with male colleagues and administrators, as one explores the files of past and present grievances, as one investigates the reasons for sustained resistance to feminine equality (which, at present, far exceeds any resistance to black power), certain myths and stereotypes surface again and again. And it becomes clear that women, even feminists, do much to substantiate these very myths that destroy them.

Let us look at some of the myths, used by women to cripple themselves and to amuse, bewilder, or infuriate their male counterparts.

1. The Myth of Medusa. This image, presently languishing but not yet moribund, had its origin early in this century, when a teacher was considered an unlikely candidate for employment, should she emanate even the vaguest suggestion of sexual attractiveness; it was assumed that, at the drop of a zipper, she would flee the classroom for the pains of pregnancy and the dubious delights of huswifery. Even through the '50's and '60's, it behooved the female graduate student to prove her intellectual seriousness by implicitly disproving her competence at anything earthier. Thus, support hose, stout and sensible shoes, horn- or steel-rimmed glasses. Thus, also, the abdication of conventional manners and even of ordinary decency. The product of such an education tends to be abrasive, exploitative, and, sometimes, blatantly self-seeking. Such a woman need not be an intellectual giant, or, if she is, she need not show it. Intelligence does not enter in at all. She has been taught merely to turn sexual roles topsy-turvy, not to display competence in her chosen field. At departmental meetings and social gatherings alike, she is not perceived as an intellect or scholar, but merely as a holy terror.

And the unfortunate effect extends beyond this. When Medusa is not shunned and avoided altogether, she is treated as one of Nature's Rejects, fit to teach freshmen and to rant and bellow in committee until she dodders off into retirement (while her chairman privately resolves never to hire another woman). She will be forgotten when promotions, pay, and responsibilities are meted out, for two reasons. First, nobody enjoys being screamed at. Second, without realizing it, she is demanding two mutually contradictory reactions at one and the same time. She wants to be regarded as an equal and yet she virtually asks for pity and condescension. These being incompatible, she receives the latter, for men are conditioned to respond to women in this way, if they get the chance.

And, should she protest, she is virtually indefensible, for she carries in her the seeds of professional disaster. In a teaching situation, the male student, already conditioned, responds as do his seniors. Such a woman, he thinks,

has nothing of interest to offer. And she sets a bad example for young girls, who generally recoil from her in horror. Her very existence suggests the need to choose between elegance and attractiveness, on the one hand, and, on the other, a career; the career, so far as the student can see, necessitates the sacrifice of practically everything else. Few adolescents, given this vision, will choose the career. Too, the possibility of any empathetic relationship between student and teacher dies at the very outset. So she is harshly criticized as a teacher, even while she is being overlooked for committee assignments. If she publishes, she is salvable; there will be something in her dossier. But not very many people publish.

2. The Myth of Circe. This, the opposite of the Medusa image, is, unfortunately, the prevalent working model for younger academic women. (The older ones can't carry it off.) To play this role, the woman, usually an instructor or assistant professor, must carefully select a wardrobe suitable for Times Square streetwalking. With ungoverned breasts bobbing gently in the breeze and yards of naked rump and thigh exposed on every staircase, she must then complain, bitterly and frequently, that she is being treated as a sexual object. In return, she will be greeted with polite snickers. Whether or not sexual parts should be titillating is irrelevant. To most men over 35 or 40--and most professors and administrators are over 40--breasts and rumps are exciting and will continue to be so until all of us, men and women alike, go blithely naked (which sounds wretchedly uncomfortable). The only practical method of ensuring equality is to demand that an equal number of males wear see-through trousers and undershorts, and, to date, no feminists are in a position to arrange that. Unfortunately, the viable alternative--to avoid exciting the male in the first place--is considered by many feminists to be somehow dishonorable.

Up to a point (and the obscenity is deliberate), men enjoy and reinforce Circe. She may even be promoted to associate, before the sedantary academic life plays havoc with her muscle tone. She is, after all, a delight to have around the office. She provides all the delights of the bordello without its sexual intimidations and all the pleasures of the idyllic romance without the responsibilities of diapers and dishwater. But, ultimately, her future is as disastrous as Medusa's. When pay time comes around, males, gently smiling, have been known to murmur that bars don't have to pay such women for working on the premises, while student evaluations suggest that, in her long and obviously flirtatious conversations with male students and colleagues, she has won little respect from anyone. She is seldom given responsibility, for she is assumed to be as preoccupied with her body as she appears. Her career peters out when age and custom wither her not altogether infinite variety.

3. The Myth of Medea. Whereas males are not always conscious of what they are saying when they attack Circe or Medusa, they can bitterly and clearly articulate their complaints against Medea, who meets every argument or difficulty with a temper tantrum or a flow of tears. Her métier is high drama. She whines. She wheedles. She has nervous collapses. (Yes, of course, some men do this, too, but this, again, is irrelevant; it will be some time yet before women can allow themselves to behave as badly as do men.)

Such a woman is the obvious and unconscious product of our culture. As an infant, she was taught to wrap daddy around her finger. As an adolescent, she

was taught to cajole and flirt, to disguise any semblance of intelligence, and to achieve her goals--heaven help us!--through pussy power. As a student, she learned to sit in the front row and raise her skirt. Even in graduate school, she might well learn to artfully arrange her eyes to gaze soulfully and tearfully into those of a balding, pot-bellied professor, whose home life is a saga of frustration and castration. The technique has been known to produce high grades and even to release assistantship money, where more straightforward students, male and female, have failed. Then she finds herself a job. Suddenly, the cultural reinforcement ceases. Dr. Frankenstein takes a longer look at his creation and finds that, on a day to day basis, such a companion is utterly intolerable. Of course, he blames the woman, who, having learned only one set of reactions, is left with nothing to do but to run through her emotional repertoire more frequently and more intensely as her own confusion and bitterness escalate. And they will, for she is a nuisance, in classroom and committee alike--subjective, personal, sentimental, and downright alarming.

4. The Myth of Penelope. Her primary commitment is to home and family or to her sexual organs, sometimes somewhat the worse for child-bearing. Again, this is a bitterly resented figure. And feminist groups have unwittingly given support to the myth by demanding maternity leaves and child care centers, without emphasizing, equally, the responsibility to rely on such benefits as little as possible. Consequently, many males genuinely believe that only the absence of these benefits stands between woman and complete sexual indulgence. (A male sociologist recently complained that, if you allow women child care and maternity leaves, they will be absent three months of every nine.) On the basis of their belief, men are reluctant to assign exceptional responsibility to women, figuring that women will inevitably freak out at the first sign of a child's sniffle, a menstrual period, or a steak sale at a supermarket in the next town.

While much of this is insupportable, women do individually add fuel to this particular flame. Taught, quite young, to discuss domestic matters and to be wary of so-called "male" subjects, women carry the habit into the job situation, introducing their children's achievements and misdeeds at quite the oddest moments. Further, as Germaine Greer has observed, a woman's womb must be in ruinous condition before she will see a doctor and frankly discuss her physical disorders; consequently, trivial malfunctions sometimes lead to real sickness and to prolonged absence from work, and even cramps are regarded as incurable and as reason to miss two days of every month. Few feminists want to discuss such matters, thus lending support to Ms. Didion's suggestion that they are, after all, romantics at heart. Yet, so long as women ask for special consideration on the grounds of sexual function, just so long will they be treated as exceptional according to these sexual functions.

5. The Myth of Hebe. This role, although again vaguely suggestive of the bordello, is the easiest trap for the really bright woman. It should be remembered that, the job market being what it has been, academe has attracted a high percentage of bright women and a high percentage of mediocre males. Bright men might choose among all the professions. Bright women would drift to academe, for it has been much easier for a woman to become a teacher than to become a dentist or neurosurgeon. Too, in many schools, only the brightest women survive the chauvinism that has turned graduate study into a Darwinian exercise in survival, while the most dismal male minds have often been encouraged to complete degrees and have done so with relatively little deliberate sabotage. Consequently, a woman, finally employed, may be astounded when she looks around her

at her male counterparts, their beady eyes struggling bravely with thought. She quickly discovers that her very existence poses a threat. So she makes coffee. She brings cake from home. She serves as secretary on committees, which neatly removes her from any active participation in discussion. She seeks no active voice in advisement or personnel policy, although only by seeking such a voice can she help her female colleagues and students. She learns to suppress the quickness of her tongue and the vitality of her diction, and this ultimately cripples her in the classroom. She is touchingly gratified when she is called by her first name, although all the men around her are using their professional titles. In this way, she finds acceptance. So, more or less, does a geisha. And, when she is finally compelled to speak to an issue, she finds she is no more heeded than is a geisha--and so she charges discrimination.

Her stance, unfortunately, is made more attractive by the existence of faculty wives, sometimes organized. (At some schools, wives are allowed to scrutinize female candidates for employment, convinced, presumably, that most candidates will lust for the bodies of the antediluvian wage-earners.) Much of the time, the wives are perceived as a faint, gray mass, but, sooner or later, they inevitably make their presence known, vociferously passing judgments in which professional, personal, and provincial values are inextricably confused. It is far easier to join them than to fight them, and so, at social gatherings, an eminent female Shakespeare scholar will diligently discuss the current price of horseradish or the breaking of the waterbag in pregnancy--and unconsciously supports the male suspicion that she really isn't too serious a scholar, after all.

Occasionally, Hebe is allowed to shuffle into administration, the assumption being that she will serve there as she has served in so many other ways. She is a good administrator, except that she insists that other women play Hebe; by now, her habitual submissiveness causes her to view with alarm the less docile products of more recent education. (One such woman managed to decimate the ranks of her female staff in less than a year.)

Obviously, these myths do not exhaust the possibilities. Obviously, also, we cannot afford even these, especially if, as seems true, they have some basis in female behavior. As long as professional women bear such auras, it will be useless to increase their number; all, eventually, will end as educational cannon-fodder. Consequently, I question the whole focus of present feminist education and the entire traditional design of feminist programs.

The first step toward a sane and useful feminism is the foundation of professional women's organizations on campuses, and the initial step, once these are founded, is the determining of local needs. There are fashionable campuses where the emphasis, doubtless, will remain Marxist. This is fine, I suppose, so long as it is clearly understood that academic Marxism has little to do with our proletariat as it presently exists. And other areas--those of middle class residential campuses--will continue to emphasis the sensual. This, too, is necessary. Many women, especially married women, possess incomes sufficient to allow them the luxuries of identity-crises and self-analysis. But, for the urban campus, the community campus, the campus which draws its clientele promiscuously from a random population, a new feminism must emerge for the secretary,

the beautician, the housewife, the welfare mother--a feminism that guides them towards control of jobs, children, bodies, emotions, and sanity, all simultaneously. While class revolt (if, indeed, these women would claim membership in a single class) and the intrinsic value of underpants seem strangely remote to many of them, they are desperately concerned with the role of women in the job market as it exists, here and now.

To reach such women, one might well begin at home, with workshops on campus for women who work on campuses, at academic ranks and in secretarial and other supporting services. The publicity for such a workshop should be voiced in tones of sweet reason, not flamboyant radicalism, lest one frighten the very women whose circumstances are most troubling. And the purpose should be self-education and self-development, with its goal a notion of professional responsibility and the defining of real professional needs and problems. One might envision this as a trial run, before feminists lunge into the community at large.

At a workshop, the real and unsavory problems of female flesh and emotions should be openly discussed. Frankly, it is difficult to romanticize female anatomy; its complexity and vulnerability suggest that it was designed, not by a benevolent god, but by a particularly muddled academic committee. It is far past time for candid discussions of how it works, how it breaks down, how it affects one's working life, and what can be done about it. There should be open discussion, also, of the peculiar psychological problems of exceptionally bright working women, whatever their actual jobs may be, and of the problems of child-bearing and child-rearing peculiar to women in the work force. There should be discussion of the myths and stereotypes of feminity--how they grow and what can be done about them. Through all of this there should be a dogged attempt to alleviate the guilt that sometimes drives working women into inappropriate or even wildly bizarre behavior. Every academic discipline could be of use, since small discussion groups must necessarily accompany workshops, if only for some poor chick who finds herself free, at last, to discuss the strange little urinary itch that has plagued her for a decade.

Such a program could then be extended into the community, where a special effort would be made to engage the interest of primary and secondary teachers. These, after all, have the greatest opportunity to effect dramatic changes in the self-concepts and self-expectations of young girls, at an age when cultural conditioning remains incomplete. For teachers, an expansion of workshop topics is indicated. For example, an educator might introduce available literature with suggestions as to how to sneak it into the currently fashionable programs on ethnic literatures. A historian might discuss the changing conceptions or images of women. (Many women, even college graduates, are astonished to learn how far emancipation has progressed, having previously assumed that the right to vote and to own property were bestowed upon Eve in the Garden of Eden; once convinced that change is constant, they become more amenable to discussions of future changes.) The historian, likewise, might fill in the conspicuous gaps in most history texts by explaining the rise of feminism as it parallels the emancipation of the laborer, white and black. Similarly, in workshop papers or in separate study groups, a psychologist might interpret the problems of adjustment common to exceptionally intelligent or aggressive adolescent girls; if such girls continue to receive the treatment they have so far, they will continue to break down or freak out long before any college level feminist program can reach them. For the sociologist, there is female role-playing and how it is taught by current textbooks and by the mass media.

The role of the humanities is self-evident. For philosophers, there is Mill, or existentialism, or the roles of women in religious traditions. For the teacher of French there is George Sand or Simone de Beauvoir. For the teacher of English, there are the novels--those of the Bronte sisters, of George Eliot, of Wollstonecraft, of Doris Lessing--the impassioned outpourings of frustrated minds. To teach them is to stir the imagination, to whet the long-dormant curiosity, and to offer a much needed sense of historical continuity and of sisterhood.

These tasks are most urgent, but, after them, comes the need to extend what has been developed into educational curricula. Programs should be offered to the high schools, if the local communities can be brought to accept them and the professionals can give their time. Such programs, modelled somewhat along the lines of the workshops, can be tightened and made academically rigorous for the college curriculum. After all, this cross-disciplinary approach will best deal with the problems of feminism, which invade all disciplines. A secondary benefit will be the avoidance of squabbles over territory, which currently taint many efforts to build new programs, causing them to fall into the hands of the shrewdest empire builder, regardless of qualification or specialization.

Simultaneously, an effort should be made to offer feminist guidance at the time of enrollment into college. At orientation, and no later, girls should be informed of the existence of a competent pool of professional females, willing to give readings course, to advise on academic and career problems if needed (and they will be needed, for many male advisors still assume that girls should take cooking and breed children), and, if necessary, to locate sympathetic (non-Freudian) psychologists, and gynocologists who will deliver babies or contraceptives, not lectures on original sin or the divinity of motherhood. The advisor should endeavor to leave an impression of grace, decorum, and professionalism (wisdom, too, would be helpful); by example and by effort, she will guide many more girls toward freedom than will ever actually enroll in a feminist program. And, so that career-oriented girls will no longer encounter the series of roadblocks and frustrations of the past, these women should tastefully but firmly insist on full participation in departmental selection and advisory proceedings.

Then, and only then, can concern focus on undergraduate programs alone. By this point, psychological crises might well be handled in childhood, when they should be handled, and college courses can be academically respectable, not rap sessions. Only thus can feminist programs survive, when the current fad subsides. Toughness of intellect, dedication of purpose, integrity of knowledge--these must be demanded, so that feminism is distinguished, not by its flash or kitsch, but by its adaptability to the highest traditions of wisdom and learning. The intellectual level should be that of Nana or Lenin or Mrs. Warren's Profession, not that of Ann Landers, or The Happy Hooker, or the primal scream.

1 "Affirmative Action for Women in 1971: A Report of the Modern Language Association Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession," PMLA, 87 (May 1972), 538.

2 Joan Didion, "The Women's Movement," New York Times Literary Supplement, 77 (30 July 1972), 1, 14.